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Families want change after neglect in Canadian care homes proved deadly during the pandemic

By Paula Newton, CNN

Updated 10:23 AM ET, Mon March 8, 2021

Families share heartbreaking stories of loss in Canadian nursing homes 04:51

Ottawa (CNN) — The harrowing details of how so many Canadian seniors were left neglected and alone in long term care homes during the pandemic are an agony to accept, let alone, to share. But families say if they're silent now, they too, would be complicit in what they consider to be cruel and preventable deaths.

"No one was there to comfort her, to explain to her, that was the most heartbreaking for me. And she really felt abandoned, that's for sure," says Nicole Jaouich as she describes her mother's last days in a care home in Quebec.

Her mother, Hilda Zlataroff, was 102 years old and suffering from dementia when Covid-19 was first detected in her long-term care facility in March of last year.

Nicole Jaouich, right, and her mother Hilda Zlataroff celebrate Zlataroff's 100th birthday.

Her family says she did not die of the virus but, as an in-room camera placed there by her family painfully documents, she wasted away.

Zlataroff was unable to feed herself without assistance and the video, provided to CNN by her family, shows her at times seemingly in pain, confused, too weak to even hold a glass of water.

"It was heartbreaking for me to know that I wasn't there and that the last six weeks of her life, she starved," said Jaouich as she shares the anguish of watching her mother suffering on camera, but forbidden from going to the care home to help.

"I was looking at my mother through the camera and she was breathing so heavily, you could see she was in pain," she said.

Canadian military brought in to help

For weeks after initial lockdowns last winter, the situation in dozens of care homes throughout the country, both public and private, grew so grave that by the end of April it was fast becoming a humanitarian crisis. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called in troops to help in some long-term care facilities in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

Trudeau said at the time that Canada was "failing" the elderly and promised that, "in the weeks and months to come, we will all have to ask tough questions about how it came to this."

To date, nearly 22,000 Canadians have died from Covid-19. Many of the families of the thousands of seniors who died in

with a vaccine 'drought'

Coronavirus hit understaffed care homes hard

The crisis began in the early days of the pandemic in March, when provincial health officials across Canada sealed off hundreds of facilities to family and visitors, believing they were protecting the most vulnerable from the virus.

But within weeks, families were horrified to learn that many of these facilities -- already chronically understaffed -- were in a state of what they described as chaotic.

"It was quite shocking to see what was happening there, for several days people cannot get a hold of their loved ones," said Nadia Sbaihi in an interview with CNN about her grandfather's death.

Rodrigue Quesnel was 94 years old when he died of Covid-19. He contracted the virus in a long-term care facility outside of Montreal. His family describes him as "larger than life" and still of sound mind but he died of the virus within days last spring.

Related Article: Canada's vaccine rollout stalls, confining seniors to their homes for months to come

"If I regret something about those last days it's that we were robbed, particularly in the first wave where we were not allowed to see our loved ones and our loved ones died alone," says Sbaihi.

Some residents were left in soiled clothing and sheets for hours, report says

Covid-19 rapidly spread through hundreds of long term care facilities throughout Canada. By June, the Public Health Agency of Canada acknowledged that 4 in every 5 Covid-19 related deaths were in long term care homes.

"That decision of the government to prevent family caregivers from going in and to not provide for adequate personnel to provide even the most basic care, that decision is completely unforgivable," says Patrick Martin-Ménard, a lawyer representing families at a coroner's inquest now underway in Quebec.

An analysis released by the Canadian Institute for Health Information in June showed that Canada's proportion of deaths occurring in long-term care homes was double that of other developed countries.

And a study released in Ontario by its advisory group on Covid-19 found that crowding, especially in older facilities, and poor working conditions for staff contributed to the high rate of mortality and morbidity in the facilities.

But perhaps most shocking was a blunt and tragic assessment by the Canadian military after they were sent into some of these facilities.

Released in May in the province of Ontario, the report documents allegations of abuse and gross neglect in at least five care homes.

the end of 2021

clothing and sheets for hours, and where Covid-19 patients were allowed to wander.

It accuses five long term care facilities in the Toronto area of having inadequate hygiene and disinfection practices and further alleges that staff ignored residents who were crying in pain, sometimes for hours.

Ontario's premier was quite emotional when asked about the report and vowed there would be "justice" and "accountability."

"It's heartbreaking, horrific, it's shocking that this can happen here in Canada. It's gut-wrenching, and reading those reports is the hardest thing I've done as premier," said Doug Ford at a press conference in May.

Related Article: Justin Trudeau 'disturbed' by Canadian military report alleging care home abuse

However, Ontario public health officials reported last week that deaths in long term care homes in Ontario from the second wave of Covid-19, which began in September, have now exceeded those in the first wave.

Both the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, where the majority of nursing home deaths occurred, have now introduced new training programs and increased salary and benefits for staff at these facilities.

"I think we have to take a very long look at ourselves collectively and think about the way that we have treated our elderly population, not just during the pandemic but over the past ten, twenty, thirty years," says Martin-Ménard.

Families hope investigations will restore a sense of dignity

Sbaihi believes the treatment of many of their loved ones in care homes was inhumane. She and other family members say that what should come of multiple investigations, still ongoing, is to finally give the elderly the attention and dignity they deserve.

"It's not going to bring anybody back, but hopefully we can have answers ... to give a voice to those who didn't have one or whose voices weren't heard," she says.

Nadia Sbaihi celebrates her grandfather Rodrigue Quesnel's 93rd birthday.

Jaouich says her mother would not have wanted her to accept what happened to thousands of seniors in those care homes. And she says she's grateful that she did finally see her mother in her last hours and give her the comfort she was lacking in her final weeks of life.

"And I held her hand, her hands were so cold, and I was warming her hands and she squeezed my hand ... three times. And this was such a moving moment for me, and I told her 'Mummy I didn't abandon you.'"

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